

Earth-Friendly Gardening & Landscaping

The GreenMan



Living Christmas trees help plant memories

For many of us, Christmas wouldn't be the same without a fragrant, fresh-cut Christmas tree in our home. And for a lucky few — those with large yards and strong backs — the holiday is an opportunity to celebrate with a living Christmas tree; a cheerful, green guest whose role in this holiday tradition is only matched by its future value in the landscape.

In the wilds of Baltimore County, my brother- and sister-in-law have been decorating their dining room with various species of five-foot firs and spruces for a number of years, later planting them around their property as specimen trees to adorn their landscape. Moreover, they look warmly at the tradition as a way to plant memories.

However, before you go dashing through the snow to a tree farm or local nursery, there are a few important details you need to address. For example, do you have a suitable place to plant your tree? Many popular species, such as Colorado Blue Spruce or Balsam Fir, will reach 40 to 60 feet or more in height. They cannot be used as foundation plantings. Of course, even if you do not have a suitable planting site, you can donate your tree to a school, church, or even a public park.

Also, remember that even a modest five-to-six foot tree can weigh upwards of 150 pounds or more, depending on how moist the root ball is. Container grown trees are somewhat lighter and easier to move about and care for, and have a better chance of surviving transplanting, although they can be more significantly more expensive.

When considering cost, you should keep in mind that purchasing a typical five-foot ball-and-burlap specimen from a rural tree farm might cost about 50 to

75 dollars, while container grown cultivars, such as "Fat Albert" and "Hoopsi" Blue Spruce, purchased from well-known local nurseries can run as high as 275 dollars.

Availability and suitability also need some reflection: not every garden center or tree farm will have a desired species in stock every year, and not every species is appropriate for the temperature extremes of our Piedmont region. A reliable nursery manager can help direct you toward the best possible options.



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After acquiring your tree, you will want to attend to the following checklist to ensure your enjoyment of the tree for years to come.

Start by digging your planting hole right away, normally two-to-three times the diameter of the root ball and at the same depth. You will never get the hole dug once the soil freezes! Retain the soil you have removed to backfill the tree later on. It might be handy to actually store the soil in a dry, protected spot to prevent it from freezing.

Inspect the branches and needles for insects or egg masses and remove them by hand. Spray your tree with an antidessicant, such as Wilt-Pruf, to help conserve moisture while indoors, and later protect the newly transplanted tree outdoors. Moisten the root ball or container and keep it moist until and after you plant the tree.

Prepare your tree for temporary indoor life by placing it in an unheated garage or shed, or on a sheltered porch, at least for several days.

Now the fun begins! Place the root ball in a galvanized tub or wash basin to keep things neat and prevent water damage. Stabilize the tree upright with bricks or stones, or create a base with several inches of gravel, which will prevent the tree from sitting in water.

Position your tree in a cool room, out of direct sunlight, and away from heat sources such as vents, radiators, woodstoves, or fireplaces. My brother-in-law

actually closes the vents in his dining room to keep it a bit cooler. Also, keep miniature lights to a minimum to avoid additional heat, or consider using the newer, super-efficient LED light strings.

Be sure to keep the root ball moist, but not wet. Drizzle moisture onto the roots periodically, or even place a layer of crushed ice atop the burlap wrapping material.

Timing is critical. Do not keep your tree indoors for more than one week, and four-to-five days is preferable. A longer visit might be enough to break dormancy and result in a loss of winter hardiness. If you set up your tree on Christmas Eve or thereabouts, get it back outdoors before you start popping corks on New Year's Eve!

As before, condition your tree for outdoor living by keeping it in a sheltered, unheated area for several days. Afterwards, plant your tree as soon as possible, watering thoroughly, and mulch up to three inches deep with straw, leaves, or aged wood chips. You may need to stake your tree if it is planted in a windy location.

And now you're done. You can begin a virtuous new year having already done a good deed for your landscape and your environment.

Finally, as an option for the less ambitious, there is an alternative to wrestling with large, heavy trees. You will find that almost every local nursery has a wide inventory of compact Alberta Spruces in containers ranging in height from one-to-four feet, sometimes larger, and costing anywhere from ten to 80 dollars. These smaller specimens might be perfect for a sideboard or table-top, especially as they seldom weigh more than 35-to-50 pounds, and grow between seven and 12 feet in height. After gracing your home during the holidays, you can plant them outdoors or even place in a decorative container at your front entrance.



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